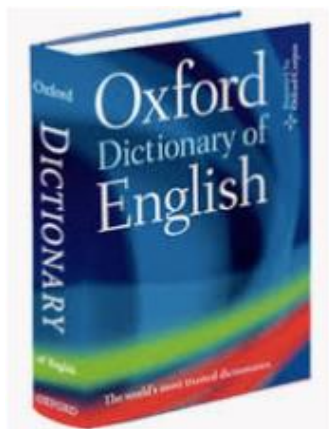


# Research with vulnerable populations in humanitarian crises: ethical challenges and overlooked areas



# What is research



- 'the systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions'.
- 'an original investigation undertaken to gain knowledge, understanding and insight'.
- human research: research 'conducted with or about people, or their data or tissue', including the involvement of people through surveys, interviews or focus groups

# Research in humanitarian crises?

- ‘Operational research’: assessments, monitoring and evaluation
- ‘Policy research’
- Academic research

# Why do we need 'operational' research in humanitarian crises?

## Humanitarian standards

- Sphere: humanitarian aid will be based on assessment of needs & capacities
- CHS: programs will be based on an impartial assessment of needs/risks, and an understanding of vulnerabilities/capacities of different groups

## Relevance, effectiveness, efficiency

- Informing program design
- continuous learning and improvement

## Accountability

- CHS: affected people can expect resources to be managed efficiency, effectively & ethically
- Can't know this without research of what worked & what didn't
- Accountability to donors and value for money

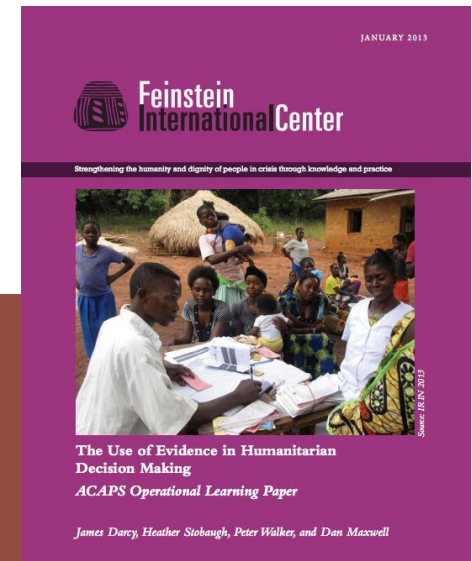
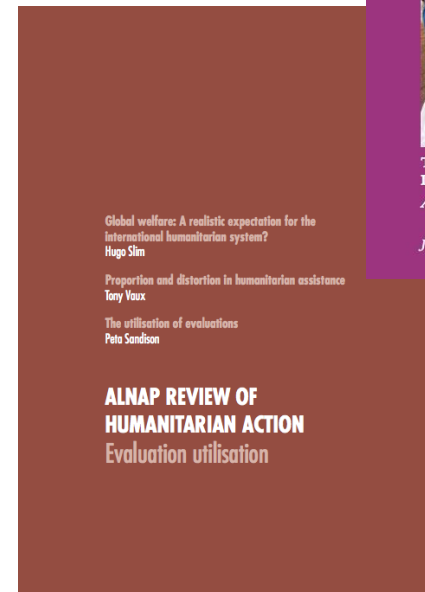
→ Plus influencing others (justifying proposals, media, advocacy)



# Is research acted upon?

We conduct research to inform decision-making. But:

- The link between assessments/evaluations and decision-making is tenuous.
- ‘Most assessments are conducted in order to substantiate a case made for funding by a particular agency or to do a particular thing’.
- ‘Only a minority of evaluations are effective at introducing evident changes or improvements in performance’



# Key considerations in humanitarian crises:

## 1. The justificatory threshold

Burden to participants must be justified by the benefits **to them**

- Participants likely to be focused on immediate needs
- Likely to be negatively impacted (security, re-traumatisation, inconvenience)
- Risk of raising expectations



what do they  
stand to gain?



# Key considerations in humanitarian crises:

## 2. Safety/security

Benefits of research must justified **the risk of harm**

- Physical safety, including travel to/from research site
- How is research perceived by political/religious/social groups
- How are researchers perceived?
  - *aid agencies are seen as associated with the govt in 'nearly every contested environment' (2017 Aid worker security report)*
  - *Al Shabaab: 'all NGOs work for spying agencies'*
- Can the research inflame social tensions?

# How can the process be improved?

## 1. Recognising and accommodating vulnerability

- People affected by crises are likely to be vulnerable & susceptible to exploitation & abuse
- Research strategies should articulate how researchers will be sure not to exacerbate vulnerabilities:
  - analyse vulnerability
  - consider specialized expertise
  - analyse the cost of participation (psychological, safety/security, time)



# How can the process be improved?

## 2. Confidentiality & informed consent

- ‘Respect’ includes respect for privacy, and respect for informed choice to participate
- Confidentiality = right to remain anonymous.
- Informed consent
  - often not properly obtained
  - see ACFID & MSF list of information to be provided to participants

# How can the process be improved?

## 3. Feedback to research participants

- Part of research merit & integrity, and respect
- Frequency neglected because:
  - Use of external consultants
  - reports often in English
  - low literacy-levels
  - research results may be sensitive
  - staff unaware of ethical obligations
  - no time

# Resources on ethical research in humanitarian crises

